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Seeing Gentrification behind the Window of a Sicilian Bakery: Reflexive Ethnography and documentary practice in Brooklyn

Lidia K.C. Manzo

What scholars think of as gentrification is often associated with more expensive and aesthetically elegant cafes, restaurants, and boutiques that appeal to the high-class consumers' tastes. Yet, it also means the displacement of working class residents and their stores. There happened to a bakery in the south part of Park Slope, a place where coffee cost less than a dollar, but the rent jumped up from four thousand dollars a month to a whopping five thousand dollars a month. So, what might be the real face of this transition? Perhaps, the face of Signora Enrica, one of two old Sicilian sisters who used to own an old-fashioned Italian Bakery. In the photo included here: "Seeing the neighborhood change", we see Signora Enrica during the last day her family's store will be open and she is there, working as always, behind the counter. It doesn't matter that men are loading the heavy bread machinery onto the truck; she is there serving Italian pastries and waiting for her customers with simplicity.

"We have been here for about twenty years, but now I am 72... I can't handle this situation anymore" the Sicilian baker tells me. Then we start speaking in Italian. And while pretending to not pay attention to the store furniture moving, she is filling a white paper bag of Italian cookies to take with me. A gift. "You should eat them at school," she says. Signora Enrica dresses simply with a traditional, Italian, white cotton work apron. Behind her I can see some of her Bakery products; "biscotti" is displayed in the Italian sign on the shelf. Her eyes are turned to the windows, to which she can see the truck that is carrying away her work from Fifth Avenue, to her changing neighborhood. Her hands are empty. Her fingers are knotted on one another as to symbolize the inevitable closing. She has a certain kind of look today ... a look that is turned on a side, a reflective look that seems to display a pensive state of mind. Signora Enrica is always neatly dressed in a traditional manner: the white Italian apron is a prominent symbol of her cultural background. She is standing with humility while waiting for a customer to purchase one of her products. I can only visualize through my sociological imagination which kind of changes from gentrification the Sicilian Baker is enduring now. I can only imagine that, with her head turned looking outward, she can see the differences either class, power, or time have brought upon her little bakery. Signora Enrica is waiting for her customers, as she always has been. In front of her, the counter on which to prepare the Italian food she sells. All around her, the products and tools of her craft. Her hands waiting to work and her eyes turned towards her world, the world of customers who are outside her avenues. (« Field note », February.24.2012)



"Seeing the neighborhood change behind the window of a Sicilian Bakery."
Brooklyn's Park Slope, NY-USA. February 2012.
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"In the physical act of doing visual research," as Rouch states, "the body of the subject, the researcher, and the viewer become in some way undifferentiated." That's a spiritual synchrony, perhaps best expressed in Marshall's words: It's happening. I'm on. And I was there; I was on with my camera, creating a unique interconnection between the subject and I.

My own experience as a researcher on gentrification resonates in this picture, particularly in the woman's expression. Her expression – mildly sad and focused on something that is not clear to the viewer – exemplifies a basic feature of gentrification: the lack of a shared perspective (intersubjectivity) during the transition, between different groups which come to inhabit the same community. In other words, while the emotional reactions to gentrification are clear and visible to all, the conditions that give rise to them are only evident to some. By showing the expression but not the conditions it's directed at, I argue that this picture represents gentrification in a unique way that is equally applicable to both the gentrifiers and the gentrified.

Conclusions: give meaning to the everyday life.

As I have stated before, at the very beginning of any visual act, there is a look. What is especially interesting in the connection of a visual act with social research is that with a photograph we capture "Life." Thanks to the enormous

potential of the visual language of sociology, observing and selecting, dealing creatively with reality, the social facts, or utilizing action research, we can document the world we encounter and give meaning to the everyday life. The powerful characteristics of a visual ethnographic work is that it draws the "spectator" to the extent that it assumes an attitude of great involvement with the sphere of everyday life, not just to express pure emotion and entertainment, but to cause the latent activity of thought and reaction. It is an interesting reflexive process of giving and taking through visual field research. I would position this work in the fine line between documentary/art photography and photography for visual research.

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About the author

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